DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 657 PS 017 323

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TITLE Australian Children's Thinking about Death: A Sydney-Based Study. Selected Papers Number 49.
INSTITUTION Foundation for Child and Youth Studies, Kensington (Australia).
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; *Children; *Concept Formation; Content Analysis; *Death; *Developmental Stages; *Emotional Response; Foreign Countries
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; Developmental Patterns

ABSTRACT

Content analysis in the manner of M. H. Nagy's 1948 study was used to explore facets of children's thoughts and feelings about death. Participants were 316 children aged 3-12 who resided in the Sydney Metropolitan Area. Subjects expressed their views on death in talking, writing, and drawing. It was found that all children progressed through three stages of development in attaining a valid concept of death. Children 3 and 4 years of age believed that death is temporary and reversible. The 5-year-olds tended to see more clearly that death meant the end of bodily functions. The expression of the concept of reversibility tended to decrease with age. A significant number of 6- to 8-year-olds understood that death was final but saw it as something that happened only to other people. In contrast, older children rarely used the third person to express their feelings concerning death. Most children 8 through 12 years of age had a realization of death in a personal or irreversible sense. It was further found that children who had come to such a realization freely experienced fear and anxiety about death. Almost half of the children aged 6-12 suffered death anxiety. (RH)

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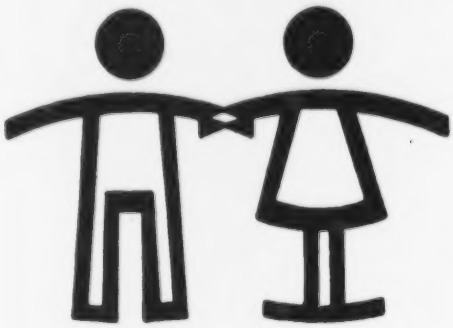

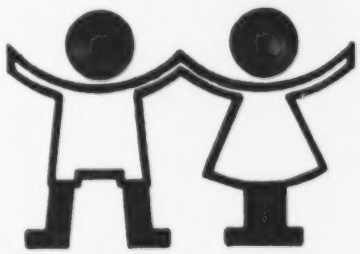

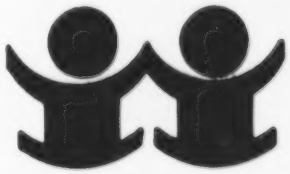

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AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S THINKING ABOUT DEATH
A Sydney-Based Study

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ISSN 0727-6834

PS 017323

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AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S THINKING ABOUT DEATH

A SYDNEY BASED STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper grew out of a recent investigation of how children think and feel about death. The study was carried out in the Sydney Metropolitan Area where 316 children ranging in age from 3 to 12 years expressed their views on death in talking, writing and drawing.

The children's responses give surprising insight into their thoughts and feelings and are often compelling in their honesty and intensity. The children freely stated their views on what happens when people die and the kinds of things which make people die. Many wrote of their sadness and loneliness in losing a pet. Others wrote poignantly of their grief at the death of a grandparent. We gain flashes of insight into the mind of the pre-school child who sees death as "going away," or a "long sleep," the early-school child who begins to realise that death happens to "them," but not to <u>me</u> and the older children who are often shattered at the discovery that they themselves will sometime die.

Each piece of writing included is "stream of consciousness," that is, thoughts and feelings quickly jotted down. No changes have been made to spelling or structure except where it was necessary to make meaning clear.

"Mummy, when you die can you walk?"
"No."
"Mummy, when you die can you run?"
"No."
"Mummy, when you die can you play baseball?"
"No."

"The bunny is dead. He is under the ground buried. He will get better. I'll fix him up. I'll fix him with my hammer."

Matthew (3)

"Death is scary and is awful. When I think about it I feel all funny. It feels like it is going to happen to you. It feels mysterious and I get all shaky when I look at it."

Maude (10)

General Background

The child's concept of death and his/her affective involvement pose a complex issue which cannot be evaluated simply; it is only in fact in the past several decades that it has begun to be regarded as an area deserving of exploration. For most of the twentieth century until the early sixties scientific interest in the topic was rare. This tended to parallel a general societal attitude which held that

a) children do not understand death

b) concern with death related phenomena would be harmful

c) children should not think about death even if they could (Kastenbaun and Costa 1977 p. 229)

However, there has been, since 1960, an increasing body of research studies and clinical investigations on children's perceptions of death and their emotional responses. These have consistently challenged the above-mentioned assumptions, so much so that there is now a general consensus that children develop an understanding of death around eight to ten years. Furthermore, it is now apparent that children of all ages think about death and fear it, especially about the age of eight when there is the realisation that it can happen to them personally. (Raphael 1984- p.99)

It is at this age that the child begins to view death as does an adult. S/he sees it as being the end of all bodily functions and irreversible. Some of the classical work in this area was done by Anthony (1971) and Nagy (1948). Other more recent researchers have noted that even small children are able to have a basic understanding of "dead" if they are helped to do so. (. Furman 1974 p 50, Raphael 1984 p 85). Two year olds may first comprehend the meaning of death when their pets die, and parents and others give clear realistic explanations, and emotional support. Furman and Raphael both note that "it is easier for the child to comprehend death when the death is not initially associated with the loss of a loved person, and by the same token it is easier to understand the death of a loved one when the child already has the concept of death (Raphael p85).

Other studies give further support to the view that children think and feel about death. Rochlin (1967), in a study with three to five year olds, concluded that the well-developed in this age group thought a lot about it and understood that it meant the end of all bodily functions. This researcher also found that these children were very interested in the causes of death.

Nevertheless, these concepts are not fully developed in the 3-5 year olds. Matthew, my own child, aged four, asserted that *"if my bunny dies we can fix him up with a hammer,"* yet the very next day made the statement, *"if you die you can't stand up and you can't see."* Children's views are too, shaped by the attitudes of parents and others close to them; their questions may reveal many conflicting ideas. *"If told by an adult that a dead parent has gone to Heaven they may see this as a star in the sky ..... a concrete interpretation of an adult's abstraction."* (Raphael p.86). Raphael also points out that the two to five year olds may have difficulty in grasping the idea of the permanency of death. The child may expect that the dead person will return having just gone away for awhile.

At this stage the child's view of the world is very egocentric. Children may at this age associate death with killing, a consequence of the *"I hate you, I wish you were dead" feeling and not* unlike the *"bang bang you're dead" games they play* with their toys. In these games children feel powerful, yet frightened and fascinated by the idea of death. I recently saw these conflicting feelings in my four year old when we took our sick cat to the vet. I had impressed upon Matthew that the cat had to be treated with care as it could die. He seemed upset and concerned initially but later took an impish delight in announcing to the people in the waiting room that *"our kitty is dead, our Kitty died."* An expression of two conflicting views.

Bowlby (1979) points out that children's fantasies about death may also be reinforced by parental comments before the death occurs. The child, when s/he has been behaving badly may be told *"you'll be the death of me," a statement that may now* be seen as fulfilled.

These are the kinds of fears and anxieties suffered by children in this younger age group. Fear can be brought on by over-protective parents who will shy away from telling the truth in order to shield the child from the harsh realities of life. When told that death is like *"going to sleep"* the child may dread going to bed. If told that you die from being sick s/he may be terrified of becoming ill. Just how concrete some of these interpretations may be is seen in the following vignette.

> *....a father told about his five-year old son's refusal to eat, which was becoming a serious problem until one night, in an unguarded moment at the supper table, as if speaking to himself, the child said, "If you eat, you grow up to be big and strong - and die." With rare explicitness he had verbalised the perfectly logical but usually unconscious kind of thinking that underlies a lot of children's behaviour.*
>
> (Moffett, 1968, p.23)

The current research continues to confirm the work of Nagy (1948) and Anthony (1971). Field (1979) found that the death concept became more developed between the ages of 7 to 12 years, as did a 1984 study (Gibbs, Sharp and Petrun). While the research has consistently shown that fear of death is present in all age groups it indicates that death anxiety particularly comes to the fore between the ages of 7-12. Matter and Matter (1982) concluded in their study of children in this age group that the preoperational child has a limited perception of death and a limited ability to understand associated symbolism. They pointed out that young children may express anxiety and that their questions should be answered as honestly as possible. Their study suggests that a fear of death may become a preoccupation as children reach a concrete operational stage. Toews Martin and Proser (1985) concluded that death anxiety occurred during preadolescence and that it was the first major statement of a theme that continues throughout life. The fact that older subjects showed higher levels of anxiety was also the subject of research done by Halpern and Palic (1984), and Atwood (1984)

The Sydney-based study

A review of the literature on children's perceptions of death and their affective involvement has revealed a great surge of interest in the area in the past twenty years. There is now a proliferation of books and articles on the topic: 55 journal articles and dissertations have appeared in the psychology abstracts alone since 1980. This growing body of research serves to reinforce the work by Nagy and Anthony as well as adding new knowledge of the subject. Nagy's work has continued to be respected as a classical study of children's death perceptions. Thus it was used as a basis for the Australian study.

Briefly, Nagy theorised that children under five see death as being reversible and not final. The youngest children are likely to interpret death as sleep or departure, while the five year old modifies this distinction by making death gradual and temporary. In the second stage, from the fifth through the ninth year, death is generally personified, and thought of as a contingency. The third stage which follows brings with it the recognition that death is a process dependent on natural laws, one which is characterised by the cessation of vital bodily activities.

The author set out to determine whether Nagy's findings may apply to Australian born children, so as far as possible used similar procedures. These involved written compositions and pictures followed by explanations. A direct questioning technique was also used, this being derived from the method used in a 1971 study by Childers and Wimmer. Material was thus collected from written compositions supplemented by direct questioning for children of seven plus, while younger children drew pictures and answered questions in open-ended taped interviews. It is to be noted that several recent studies have also used interview and questionnaire data. (Atwood 1984 Wass et al 1983 and Fulton et al 1982)

Limitations

Several severe constraints were placed on the study by the nature of the topic, in terms of adult attitudes to children and death-related issues. This, to a certain degree, had been expected from a general agreement in the American and European literature that, despite gradually changing views among researchers and counsellors, death had been avoided as a topic of discussion with children.

It was then expected that school personnel might show some reluctance in involving their children in the study. However, the general pattern of negative responses from school principals was higher than anticipated: Only 5 out of the 18 schools invited to participate agreed to take part in the study, 2 of these only after long and careful deliberation. Herein lay one of the main difficulties of the study, and indeed one of its major shortcomings.

Assessing the Material

The technique known as content analysis was used to assess the material. Again Nagy's study provided the framework in which the content was analysed.

She had found that children expressed particular themes pertaining to the nature of death, these being a function of age. Each of these themes was applied as a unit of analysis in this study, the children's expressions of these providing initial indicators in an attempt to discover whether Australian children expressed the same themes. The themes are summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Research Source	Themes	Ages of children 3-5	6-8	9+
Nagy 1	death is gradual, temporary	*		
Nagy 2	death associated with going away	*		
Nagy 3	death is sleep, a departure	*		
Nagy 4	personification of death		*	
Nagy 5	death is punishment for wrong doing	*	*	
Nagy 6	the occurrence of death by unnatural causes	*	*	
Nagy 7	denial of death	*	*	
Nagy 8	death is final, universal and personal			*
Anthony 9	fear and anxiety			*
Nagy 10	children think about death			*
Nagy 11	death is associated with darkness		*	*
Nagy 12	the association of death with separation and loss		*	*

*indicates the age at which the theme is predicted to become dominant.

Since some subjective judgement was necessary in finding a systematic pattern of theme indicators, particularly in view of the need to analyse the hidden meanings of the child's responses, verification was considered to be a crucial issue. Besides the careful checking and rechecking of content, in order to establish common indicators, and precise counting of the children's responses, an independent judge was introduced to code a sample and interpret the responses. This showed a sufficiently high level of reliability to encourage confidence in the value of the results.

The same standard procedure was used with verbal as with written data. Some significant trends emerged from the precise coding of responses for each theme from which certain inferences may be drawn. However, the findings must be considered in terms of their sampling limitations; while they represent an important starting point, they cannot be regarded as definitive in terms of Australian children in general.

The need for subjective judgement on the part of the investigators should also be kept in mind, together with variables such as religious, cultural and family influences. Nevertheless, the analysis can be used as a basis for finding whether Australian children expressed these themes and if so, whether their verbal and written responses reflected these themes in any new ways.

Children's Thinking About Death
Summary of results

It was found that all children progressed through three stages of development in attaining a valid concept of death, (i.e death is final, personal, irrevocable) usually around the age of nine.

In table 2 which follows, there is a summary of indicators to themes expressing children's concept of death across the age range 3 to 12 years.

Table 2: Summary of indicators to themes expressing children's concept of death across the age range 3-12 years

TOTAL: 316 children

	Number in each age group	65	115	126
	Themes	3-5 years	6-8 years	9+ years
T1	Death is reversible	17	4	1
T2	Death associated with going away	11	3	5
T3	Death is going to sleep	11	5	23
T4	Personification of death	6	3	7
T5	Death is punishment for wrongdoing	13	0	8
T6	The occurrence of death by unnatural causes	41	46	24
T7	Denial of death	11	46	8
T8	Death is final, universal, personal	27	28	80
T9	Fear/anxiety	4	55	64
T10	Children think about death	4	31	56

WHAT CHILDREN SAID ABOUT DEATH

The child from three to five

The youngest children in this group believed that death is temporary and reversible expressed through themes 1,2 and 3. Of the 3 and 4 year olds 10 out of 18 thought that if a person died s/he would come back to life; 4 of the 18 told the interviewer that death meant going away. Eleven of the eighteen children interviewed thought that dying was a temporary sleep state.

Thus it can be seen that a significant number of children in this youngest age group found the permanency of death difficult to grasp. The children's belief in the reversibility of death is highlighted in the following comments, recorded in a taped interview.

"They go to a hospital one day then they get better, then they go home."
"You can put your body back together again."
"You see the doctor to get better again."
"The people have died. They are walking here. They can get better if they go to the hospital."
"The ambulance takes you to the hospital ... and the person can come alive from the doctor."
"If you die ... the doctor can make you well again."
"You need a needle ... you get better if you go to the doctor."

Other three year olds freely expressed their views that to die meant to go away.

"You go in the car, (when you die). You go up to Queensland."
"They go up to the sky (the people who die) ... they come back by plane."
"They go walking" ... (when they die)"
"When people die they walk ....to the hospital."

These children were asked to draw a picture prior to being taped in open-ended interviews. The intention was to help the children focus their thinking on the topic under discussion. The ideas expressed by Clara, Daniel and Cameron add insight to the preschoolers' view of death.

Clara (aged 4)

Interviewer	*"Now Clara, I asked you to draw a picture of what you think happens when someone dies. Tell me about your picture."*
Clara:	*"This is the man and this is the dragon."*
Interviewer:	*"What is the dragon going to do?"*
Clara	*"He's going to run away because they scared him. They have got a fire in their bodies and he's got fire in his body."*
Interviewer	*"What do you think happens when someone dies?"*

Clara: "Has to go to the hospital."
Interviewer: And what happens there?"
Clara: "You need a needle."
Interviewer: "What happens after that? Can you get better if you die?"
Clara: "Yes."
Interviewer: "How?"
Clara: "You get better if you go to the doctor."

Daniel (aged 3 1/2)

Interviewer: "What makes people die?"
Daniel: "A gun."
Interviewer: "What else?"
Daniel: "Dark."
Interviewer: "Anything else?"
Daniel: Water and drown."
Interviewer: "What happens to people when they die. "Where do they go?"
Daniel: "They tell the police."
Interviewer: "If you die can you get well again?"
Daniel: "The doctor can make you well again."

Cameron (aged 3)

Interviewer: "Do you think you are ever going to die?"
Cameron: "No."
Interviewer: "What do you think happens when someone dies?"
Cameron: "They go to the sky there."
Interviewer: "Do they come back?"
Cameron: "Yes"
Interviewer: "How can they come back?"
Cameron: "With a jumbo."
Interviewer: "By a plane you mean?"
Cameron: "Yes."

These children were confident that the dead person would return. From their previous experience people and pets went away but came back.

The five year olds generally showed a more developed death concept. They tended to see more clearly that death meant the end of bodily functions. However, their pictures and comments revealed many conflicting views, complicated by information given them by others about death. This is seen in the following stories to accompany pictures drawn by the children.

"A boy ran across the railway track. He died and was taken to hospital. He came alive however, and walked around."

(James (5)

"The dead person is up in heaven. You can come alive again. You are blind and come back to live again. Bad people die but not good people. They stay alive for ever and ever.

Jane (5)

Death to some of the three and four year olds (11 out of the 18 children) meant sleep, but sleep from which one would awake. Several of the comments follow.

'You go in a coffin. It would be a bit stuffy.'

"This is God watching the person."

It is interesting to note that twenty percent of the youngest children associated death with wrongdoing. (Table 2, Theme 5)

"Bad people die. Good people don't die."

"Baddies and these people die."

"Bad people die. I am shooting my mum. She is dead."

"Old people die and baddies."

"Bad people die. Policeman kill then sometimes."

"Bad people die."

'This is my pussy cat. The cat died because I gave it lots of milk. The cat is nasty because he scratched me."

As in other attempts to replicate Nagy's study, little evidence was found for the personification of death, the frequency of responses for theme 4 being too small and scattered to be in any way significant.

THE FIVE TO EIGHT YEAR OLDS

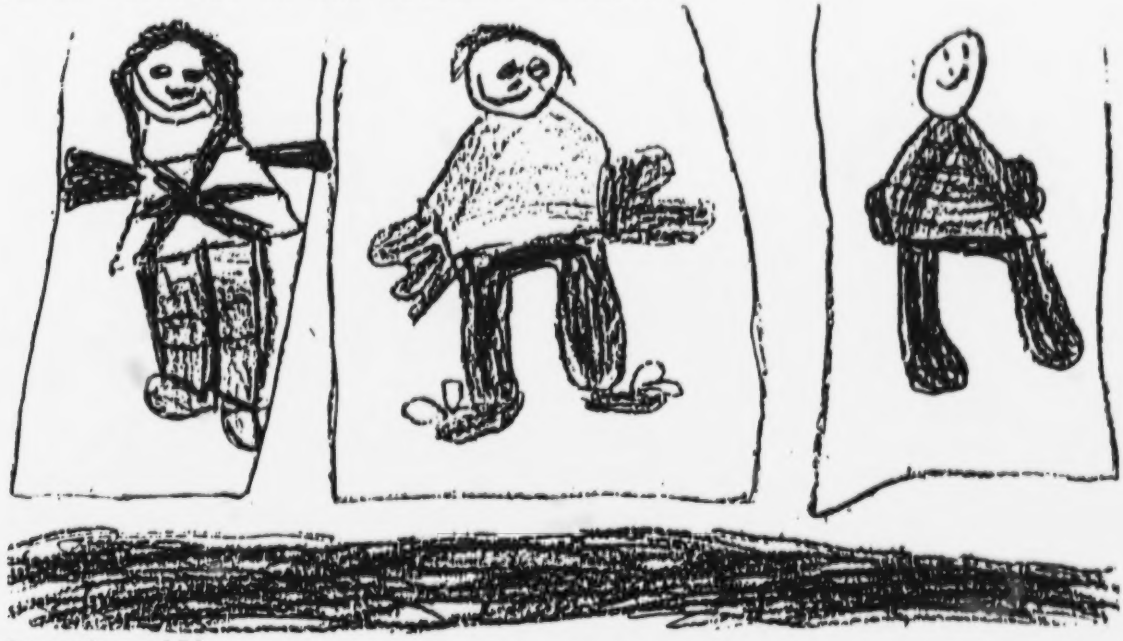
Many of the views expressed by the 3-5 year olds continued to be apparent in the 5-8 year old children. However, the expression of the concept of reversibility tended to decrease with age. (See table 2). This emerged as one of the most important threads to follow in exploring the child's thinking about death and was consistent with the findings of Nagy. As the children got older they expressed a more developed concept of death - even the five-year olds generally had let go of their reversibility of death idea. Most of this age group seemed willing to accept that old age, accidents and violence caused death. Indeed they were particularly interested in the causes of death. Death however, was a long way off for the 5 and 6 year olds.

"You die when you are very grown up."
"I will die when I am up to 100.

Death was an intellectual possibility only, and therefore remote. If death occurred, as the five to six year olds often believed, by killing and accidents then it was depersonalized and only happened to other people. Fascination with the causes of death was seen in the youngest children through to the older

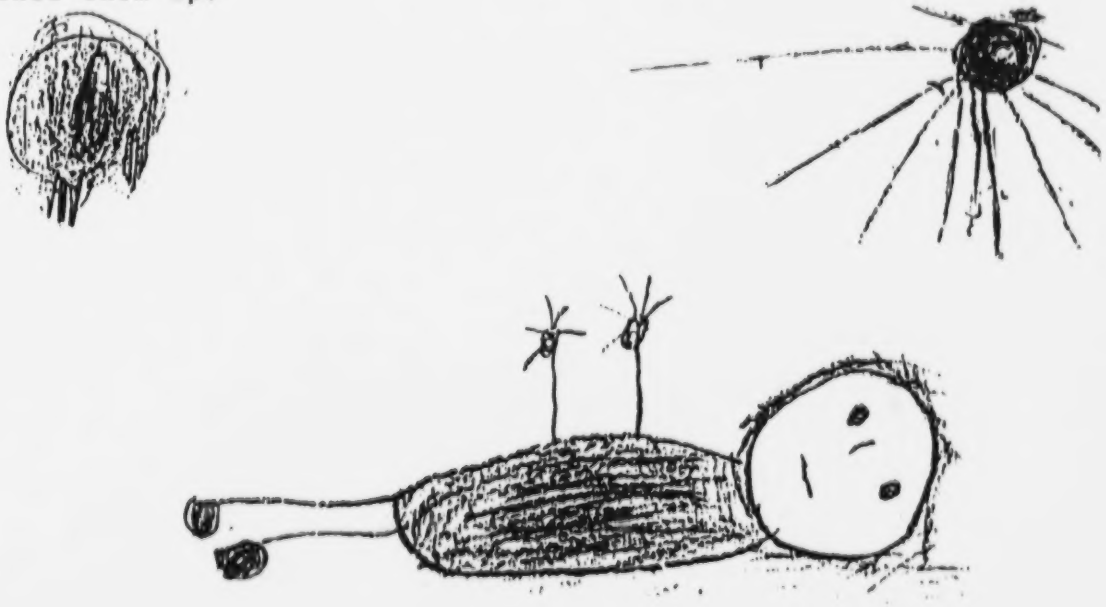
subjects of the study. It was most apparent however in the five and six year olds.

Pictures done by 5 and 6 year olds follow in illustration in their interest in the causes of death.

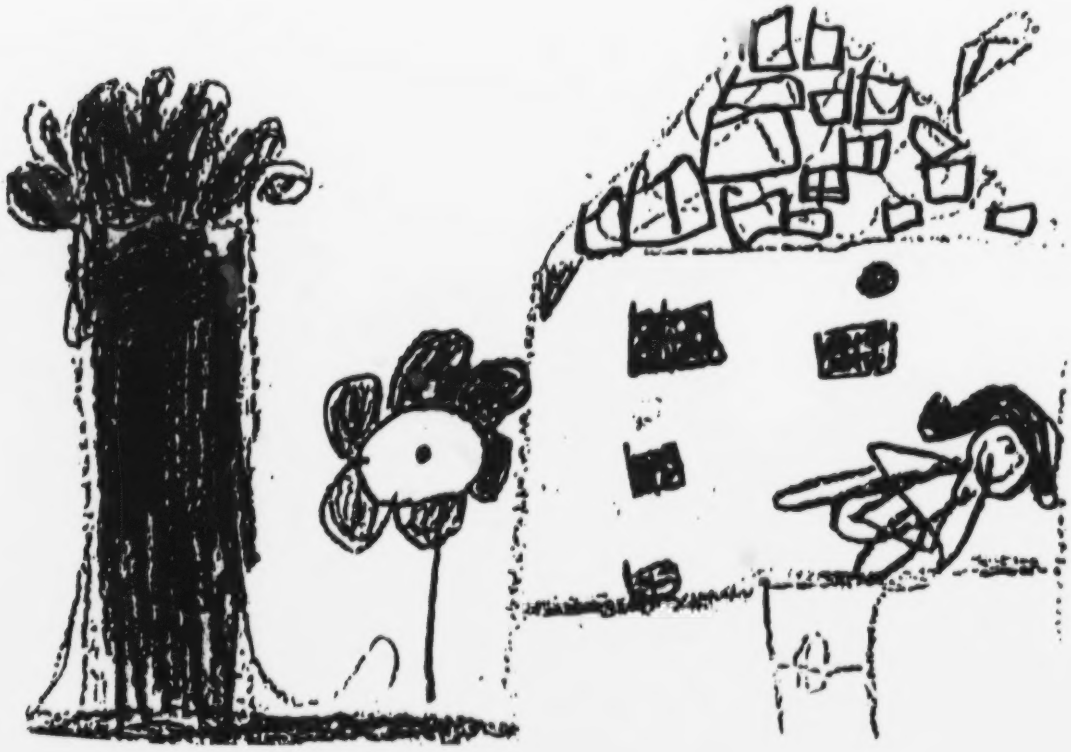


Jonathan (5)

These people are dying in bed because the electric blanket was on and there was a fire. They go to the hospital and the doctor fixed them up.



Melissa (6)
The person is lying on the grass and she goes up to heaven. A gun made her die or someone can cut you in half. I will die when I grow up.



A little girl is dead. someone came in through the door. It was a robber, he killed her when her mother was away. Guns make people dead. I will die when I'm up to 100.

A significant number of children in the 6-8 age group (40%) inferred that death did not affect them personally by their frequent use of the third person. The finality of death was understood but was seen as something that happened only to other people. (See Table 2, theme T6.)

"Death is when they go to heaven.".
"When someone dies I feel sad when they die we have a funeral which makes a lot of people cry."
"When I hear that someone has died I always feel sorry for them."
"If my friends died I would hate to be them."
"I feel sad for someone when they die."
"I don't like it when someone dies. I know if someone I loved died I would never be as happy as I am now."

THE CHILD FROM EIGHT TO TWELVE

It is interesting to note that the older children rarely used the third person to express their feelings concerning death. Furthermore, the concept of death as being final was expressed by fifty nine percent of this age group compared with twenty four percent of the middle group. Most have come to a realisation of death in a personal or irreversible sense.

Death is the end of life.
Death is when you can't
play with your friends.
It's the end of everything it's the end of school: marrige: and the end of seeing this wonderfull world.
You don't have to do anything when you are dead.
You don't go to school
You don't go to school you don't play just like sleeping for ever.

Mary (11)

Death
Pain
Unhappiness
It is a feeling of sadness
you feel you want to cry
you feel lonely
Quiet
Funeral
You want to buy an expensive coffin
You find out your dying and you have pain. Your old. Your weak. you want to be with someone your lonely. You die. your heart stops beating your still your in a deep sleep and you will never wake up again. On your death bed.

Death is a feeling of quiet

Melinda (10)

Both compositions contain references to the cessation of bodily activities; both children see death as an irreversible process. Specific indicators from other compositions further illustrate this widespread viewpoint among older children.

Death is the end of life.

Growing up is dreadful because you know at the end is death.

"I think when you die you are as dead as a table... you stay there and the world goes on and on."

"Death happens to everyone."

"Death is the end of life, the time to leave earth."

"Death is the stopping of vital functions of the body."

"A natural happening."

"We all must die."

"The body stops functioning and the heart slows down to a dead stop."

In summary, evidence indicates that the awareness of death as universal and irrevocable is a function of age. However, the fact that a number of the younger children expressed this theme suggests that life experiences, family and social class influences, intelligence levels and other factors all seem to play a significant part in each child's individual under standing of death.

CHILDREN'S AFFECTIVE RESPONSES TO DEATH

It was found that the children who had come to a realisation of death in a personal irreversible sense freely experienced fear and anxiety. More recent research has continued to confirm this discovery (Raphael 1984, Matter and Matter (1982). Almost half of the 6-12 year olds suffered death anxiety, this being consistent with the findings of Anthony (1971) who hypothesised that children develop a critical kind of anxiety when they recognise that they are independent beings and consequently can die.

Whereas the younger children's anxieties are centred upon the fear of separation and who will look after them, older children also worry about physical dimensions such as the pain of the dying person.

"Death is bad. Death is the last thing I want to think of. Just thinking that death is the last thing you will ever happen. I remember in January my Granpa died. I didn't want to laugh, play games. All I wanted to do was to sit down and cry. I remember when Granny died. She died in a lot of pain. I hope there is happiness where you go next. I hope you don't just live on. My Granny would be in pain if she lived on. Death, just thinking of the word makes me go up and down in sadness."

Jonathon (11)

"Death is something I can't face up to. When my father died I grieved for two months. No one can understand why someone they love has to die. You feel tense and muddled up for ages. You don't feel like doing anything. My mother says she had a message from my father in a dream. You know your loved ones can't come back to you and live again."

Ann (10)

Death anxiety can in older children become a preoccupation, as suggested by Matter and Matter (1982) and is very painful emotionally.

"When I think about dying I wonder when it will be my turn and I get frightened."
"I think about death when I am home by myself, or get lost."
"(When I was small) I never thought that death could happen to my family but I soon realised it could, and did things just a little more carefully."
"I just keep on getting mixed up about death and what it feels like to be dead. I would like to know now."
"Sometimes I dream of it at night-time."

"When I was younger death was sort of something gone wrong - a short circuit, a black out. Now I know more than that."
"I think about death when I am in bed at night. It is all black quietly and not an insect stirring. When I think of death fear circles my mind."
"You go to heaven - it's dark."
"Death is black, gone, unbelievable, never happens, and, black, black horror, hopeless. Invisible white, dark, life before my eyes, crush falling scream no go."

"Death is very sad because when they die you cannot see them again."
"I wouldn't like being dead because on my birthday I wouldn't get any present."
"You feel like a piece of you has been taken away. You get a feeling like you never had before. It's a great loss."
"I feel sad about death because when you die you just be buried in dirt and after a few days no one even thinks of you."

It is important to realise that older children are more able to articulate their anxieties. However, young children who have little opportunity for accurate information may well suffer death anxiety as seen in their confused and often persistent questions.

My four year old child's questions come quite unexpectedly.... *"Mummy don't die, don't grow old. Are you old? I don't want you to die." And, whilst staying with grandparents - "Mummy, grandpa said drink lots of water and you won't grow old and die. Have water now. Don't want you to die."*

RECOMMENDATIONS - EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN

There were several important discoveries as the result of this study. Firstly, it was found that a surprising number of children thought about death and were willing, if not eager, to communicate their feelings. Secondly many children feared death. This was especially evident in the older children who were cognitively more able to understand the concept and to express their feelings in writing.

As adults, we need to be sensitive to the needs of the children in our care - children of all ages. Children want to talk about death and dying - when the need arises. It is often the case, however, that adults experience great difficulty in talking about death. We ourselves are often so ill at ease with the topic. At times it may be unavoidable that our own fears be transmitted to children. The best we can hope for is to keep these feelings at a manageable level.

With knowledge of the stages through which children pass and their feelings about death, parents and other care givers can assist by giving children consistent warmth and support. The child also needs honest answers which while they are directed to the level of the child's understanding should be clear and realistic.

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